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SUBJECT The Bulgarian Connection

ROBERT MACNEIL: In May 1981, Pope John Paul was shot in St. Peter's Square. Does the assassin's trail actually lead to Moscow and the top Soviet leaders?

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MACNEIL: The Soviet newspaper Pravda said today it was utterly absurd to suggest that the Soviet Union or Bulgaria were involved in the assassination attempt on the Pope in 1981. The Official newspaper Pravda accused the Central Intelligence Agency and the U.S. Government of using the story to undermine Soviet disarmament proposals.

The Italian government has charged that Bulgarian intelligence agencies were involved in the attempt on the Pope's life by the Turkish terrorist Mehmet Ali Agca. The Italians arrested a Bulgarian airlines official and have been questioning him for six weeks.

The alleged Bulgarian connection has inevitably raised the question of whether such a momentous event could have been planned without the Kremlin being involved as well. That idea has in turn caused the Italian evidence to be greeted with some skepticism, even embarrassment, in the West.

Tonight, how good is the evidence that the assassination attempt on the Pope was a Bulgarian-Soviet plot?

JIM LEHRER: Robin, Mehmet Ali Agca says he learned to kill people in Lebanon in 1977 as a student at a terrorist camp run by the Soviet-backed Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Less than two years later, he was arrested back home

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in Turkey for the assassination of a prominent newspaper editor. He immediately and publicly confessed to the murder, and then later in court said he didn't do it, but he knew who did. That veiled threat to spill the beans apparently got him what he wanted -- freedom. A month later he escaped from prison by walking out in an army uniform, having passed through eight normally locked doors on the way out.

The next day, he wrote a letter to a newspaper threatening to shoot the Pope when he came to Turkey three days later. There was no assassination attempt then, and Agca left Turkey, ending up eventually in Sofia, Bulgaria. There he stayed in the best hotel for 50 days, living the good life and meeting, among others, a prominent arms and drugs smuggler, who reportedly wanted the Pope dead.

From Bulgaria, Agca went to West Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Spain, and Tunisia, among other places, on a grand tour that officials estimate cost at least \$50,000. Finally, he ended up in Italy on a three-month Italian student visa and went to Rome. There, through the good offices of the smuggler back in Sofia, he met three Bulgarians, the airlines official and two Bulgarian Embassy employees, all of whom allegedly assisted in Agca's attempt on the Pope's life in St. Peter's Square.

That is a rough piecing-together of some of what has come out thus far, all of it drawn from what Italian officials have either released or leaked, or from the independent journalistic investigations conducted by Reader's Digest and NBC News. Both of the American news organizations were assisted in their investigations by Paul Hinsey (?). He worked as a specialist on Turkish terrorism, the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe at the National Security Council in the Carter Administration. He is now a research fellow at the Rand Corporation.

First, Mr. Hinsey, is there anything you would add to my description of what the evidence is up till now?

PAUL HINSEY: Well, there's a lot of other evidence, and some of it involves the Bulgarian connection. Some of it is coming out at the present time as a result of the arrest in Germany of an interesting Turkish figure by the name of Celebe (?). It appears that the story is even more complicated than we've seen to date. And I have the feeling that a great deal more is going to come out over the next few weeks. Clearly, the Italians have collected far more than they've revealed.

LEHRER: What does it add up to you at this point, as we sit here tonight?

HINSEY: Well, I think the evidence is almost

incontrovertible. The Bulgarian connection with Turkish terrorism goes very far back in time. It goes way back into the '70s. It probably even goes back into the '60s. The Bulgarians were smuggling arms into Turkey, supporting terrorists over a long period of time. They were aiding and abetting drug traffic. They were giving lenient treatment to a group called the Turkish Mafia, of international smugglers and unprincipled business dealers who could not find refuge, certainly, for any period of time in any Western country. This is most peculiar in a communist country, where everything that goes on is basically, in the last analysis, controlled by the state.

LEHRER: But what about the direct connection between Agca and the Bulgarian -- and official Bulgaria?

HINSEY: Well, it's -- Agca was an extremely well-known personality in Turkey. For a year, Agca was in the headlines in Turkey. When Agca escaped, it was all over the Turkish press and it was all over the world press. It's inconceivable that Bulgarian, which after all does follow Turkish affairs closely and which is right next door, didn't know who Agca was.

Under those circumstances, it's very difficult to imagine that Agca could arrive in Bulgaria, whatever passport he was carrying, and not be known to the Bulgarian authorities.

The estimates of Agca's stay in Bulgaria actually vary from perhaps six weeks to six months. We really don't know. This part of it has not been clarified.

Agca left Turkey under very mysterious circumstances after escaping from prison. In the dead of winter, he went over high mountain passes into Iran, of all places. Iran, at that point, in the early weeks and months of 1980, was one of the last places in the world anybody would want to go to to seek refuge. You'd get into trouble by simply standing on the street in Iran in those days. The Iranians were holding the American Embassy hostage. They were -- the country was in a state of disorder. Why Agca went to Iran and where he went from Iran has never been clarified.

LEHRER: Well, one piece of speculation I read today was that he went from Iran to the Soviet Union. Is there anything to that?

HINSEY: Well, it's entirely possible. After all, the Soviet Union is right next door to Iran, and it would be a very nice way to go in the back door.

LEHRER: All right. Now, you've been to Turkey and you've talked to Agca's family. Agca, from the very beginning --

I mean the day after the assassination attempt on the Pope -- has been described as a religious fanatic, a crazed terrorist. The most recent designation has been he was a cool hired gun.

What is your feel for this man? How would you describe him? What...

HINSEY: He's much closer to being a cool hired gun, certainly, than he is to being a religious fanatic. There was nothing religious about Agca. I verified this by talking to his mother, his brother, his sister, the people in his home town. Agca was a very typical young Turk, in that sense. He was no more religious than most young Turks are today, and no more religious than most young people are in most parts of the world. He seldom went to mosque. He observed only the standard holidays. He showed no interest in religion. He never wrote anything about religion.

Agca, on the other hand, was a very bright student. He had a reputation in high school for being somewhat of a loner. His nickname was Emperor because he held himself above others. He had good grades. He read a lot. He had a reputation for knowing a lot among his fellows.

This leads me to think that Agca was spotted somewhere fairly early as a very promising recruit to terrorism. And...

LEHRER: And he was in it for the money, and the money was there.

HINSEY: Well, the money began to flow very early. One of the things we discovered in the course of the NBC program last year, last spring and summer, was that sums of money began moving into bank accounts fairly early in Agca's career. This is most extraordinary for a student anywhere in the world of modest circumstances.

LEHRER: All right. Thank you.

MACNEIL: Now we hear from a man who has studied Bulgarian intelligence and believes Bulgarian involvement with terrorist groups in Italy goes far beyond the Agca affair. He is Michael Ledeen, a senior fellow at the Georgetown Center for Strategic and International Studies. Mr. Ledeen was a special adviser to Alexander Haig when he was Secretary of State.

Mr. Ledeen, is the Bulgarian connection with Agca and this plot credible to you?

LEDEEN: Oh, yes. Absolutely. And it's not just the Bulgarian connection with Agca that's got the Italians upset

right now, but a wide variety of Bulgarian espionage activities in Italy, of which there are three principal ones. The first is Agca himself. The second is an enormous drug and arms-running operation in the North of Italy. And the third is the penetration of the Italian trade union movement at its very highest levels by a confessed Bulgarian agent and his wife, who also worked for the Bulgarians. And this guy, among other things, was in very close contact with the Solidarity trade union in Poland.

MACNEIL: Now, back to the alleged plot on the Pope. What makes this lead from the Pope to Agca to the Bulgarians to the Soviets credible to you?

LEDEEN: Motive and opportunity, the usual things that you look for in analyzing a crime. The Russians had every motive to remove the Pope from the world scene. He was...

MACNEIL: Describe that motive to us, as you see it.

LEDEEN: Well, the Russians faced, in the Polish case, a tremendous threat to the empire. If Poland goes independent, if freedom really gets a toehold in Poland, there's no telling where it may lead. And this threatens the entire Soviet system.

The real leader of Poland is the Pope. He is the great legitimate figure of authority in that country. The great majority of Poles are Catholics, not communists, as we found out when he made his trip there. And American television reporters interviewed people on the streets, and they told him this. And if you look at the Solidarity movement itself, all their leaders carry pictures of the Pope. There are pictures of the Pope hanging in the Gdansk shipyards. Walesa comes to the Pope, talks to him, looks to him for spiritual and political guidance.

So that for the Russians, as they contemplated a military operation in Poland -- and remember, they had to contemplate the full range of military operations -- the figure of a Pope, the man who wrote a letter to Brezhnev saying, "If you invade Poland, I will lead the Polish resistance," is a tremendous threat. And under those circumstances, they had to consider removing him.

MACNEIL: Is there anything missing from this so far which gives you some doubt about it?

LEDEEN: Well, yes, but I expect it'll always be missing. There is no Freedom of Information Act in the Kremlin, after all.

MACNEIL: I see. Well, thank you.

LEHRER: Mr. Hinsey, do you go that far in your belief? That you're firm about the Bulgarian connection. Do you believe it's then automatic that there has to be a Soviet connection as well, that there is one?

HINSEY: I think it's absolutely out of the question that the Bulgarians could undertake this on their own. Of all the East European countries, they have the least motivation. They have no Catholic population. They have no quarrel with the Pope. And the Bulgarian reputation, over a long period of time, is that of the most loyal of the satellites. Bulgaria has never had any real serious dissidence that's threatened the Soviet relationship.

LEHRER: We'll probably not know -- never know the answer to the question I'm about to ask the two of you. But both of you have studied this.

What is your best guess? Do you think that Agca was literally approached and hired to kill the Pope for a certain amount of money? Or do you think it just -- what do you think actually happened? Did the Soviets make the decision, then tell Bulgarians, "Go find somebody"?

The Bulgarians, "Well, we've got this guy."

"Okay. Here's some money. Go do it"?

LEDEEN: I think that Agca was sent to Rome without knowing exactly what his mission was going to be. Because the stuff in the Italian press recently suggests that he may have been sent there to kill Walesa some months earlier, when Lech Walesa went to Rome. So he may -- he certainly was there twice, because he checked into the same hotels, using the same alias and the same phony documents the first time, when Walesa went to Rome.

So my guess is the Russians put him there and said, "Perhaps we'll get Walesa. Perhaps we'll get the Pope," depending on how their contingency planning was going in Poland and how developments unfolded.

HINSEY: I think it's possible, also, that the whole operation against the Pope may have been kept on a standby basis until some real opportunities developed. And the opportunity that developed, which has received very little attention, is the fact that Cardinal Wyszynski, along with the Pope, the real symbol of nationalism and religious strength in Poland, became deathly ill in March of 1981.

Now, that is exactly time when Celebe, in Germany, says

that he went to Zurich to meet Agca and offered to pay him three million marks to assassinate the Pope.

LEHRER: Gentlemen, there's one fly in this ointment, and I'm sure you're aware of, is that Agca wrote a letter in 1979 to a Turkish newspaper threatening to kill the Pope. That was long before there was Solidarity, long before there was a problem in Poland.

HINSEY: Well, there was a problem in Poland at that point. I think the Russians were concerned about the Pope from the moment he was elected. So I don't find it too surprising that Agca would have been exercised by letting him write a letter and seeing how well he did. I think Agca at that point was being tested and tried, and he proved himself pretty good.

LEHRER: You mean you think he was told to write the letter?

HINSEY: I think he was probably told to write the letter. Yes. I can see no other reason why Agca would write a letter about the Pope. The Pope's visit to Turkey went off very successfully and there was no opposition to it.

LEHRER: Thank you.

MACNEIL: For another perspective, we have Harry Gelman, former specialist on Soviet bloc intelligence for the Central Intelligence Agency. Currently a senior fellow at the Rand Institute, Mr. Gelman is working on a book about detente. He joins us tonight at public station KCET in Los Angeles.

Mr. Gelman, do you find this story credible?

HARRY GELMAN: I am inclined to think that, on balance, it is more likely to be true than not. But I'm not quite as convinced as Mr. Hinsey and Mr. Ledeen.

MACNEIL: What causes you some doubts about it?

GELMAN: Well, I think -- I'll give you the positive side first. I think there is a -- if the Italian press leaks are substantiated and caught and stand up, the accusations against the Bulgarians who have been accused, then I think there's a very strong circumstantial case linking it to the Bulgarian government, to the KGB, and to the top Soviet leadership, including Brezhnev. I think the chain of evidence goes all the way up to the top.

MACNEIL: And it would have to go through Yuri Andropov, who was then the head of the KGB.

GELMAN: Indeed. If Antonov and the other two Bulgarians did in fact connive at the assassination of the Pope, if that is proven -- and it has not yet been proven -- then these people are almost certainly members of the Bulgarian intelligence service, I would think. The Bulgarian government has to be aware of this. The Bulgarian government and intelligence service, we take for granted, is massively controlled by the KGB. The Soviets, on their part, do not delegate authority of this kind. If any Soviets were involved, it would have to have been passed all the way up to the top of the KGB. And Mr. Andropov, at that time, would not have done it on his responsibility. It would have had to have been approved by Mr. Brezhnev. So the chain of logic leads all the way up to the top almost immediately.

On the other hand, there are some points which give me pause, and which I think others have been puzzled by.

MACNEIL: What are they?

GELMAN: For example, is it plausible, is it really plausible that the Soviets thought that killing the Polish Pope would really solve their problem? It's conceivable, but I'd want to see some more evidence, and I'm not sure I'll ever get it.

On the other hand, on that very point, one could argue that in May of last year, the moment the assassination attempt occurred, the Soviets were at their most desperate state in Poland. And it must have seemed to them by no means as clear as it now seems that they could wrap it up as easily as they have done in practice.

As you remember, the Polish party was falling apart at that time. And it seemed very likely to everybody that the Soviets might in the end have to invade, that the present solution was by no means as certain as it now seems, in retrospect.

So that is a partial answer to that question, but it doesn't satisfy me.

The other thing that bothers me is, is it credible that the Soviets were really such bunglers as to let the Bulgarians take such a prominent role in running this operation? The Bulgarians, of course, being so closely tied to the Russians, historically and in every other way, and being associated with the Russians in the public mind. It is not very much of a cover, of a protection. It does not really give the Soviets much of an excuse. And are the Soviets really -- were the Soviets really willing to accept this kind of risk?

MACNEIL: Are you saying that if they had planned some-

thing which would be so momentous, that they would have done it, typically, in a more subtle way?

GELMAN: Yes. And I would imagine, I would suppose that they would have wanted to keep the Bulgarian role somewhat disguised, using still other people as intermediaries. It is kind of naked to have Bulgaria that closely identified. Of course, they didn't expect the Bulgarians to be caught.

MACNEIL: Well, thank you. We'll come back in a moment.

LEHRER: Another view of it now from Barry Carter, who worked on U.S.-Soviet relations under Henry Kissinger at the National Security Council and later was a staff member of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, which looked at U.S. intelligence operations in 1975. He now is an associate professor of law at Georgetown University, where one of the courses he teaches is on the appropriate legal reactions to international terrorism.

First, do you have an opinion on whether or not this connection has been established, or does it add up to you?

BARRY CARTER: Well, as the three previous panelists have said, there's a strong circumstantial case that the Soviets might well be involved. But I'm not sure the case has been proven yet. It's a highly risky operation, and why did they trust the Bulgarians?

But I, as an old trial lawyer, I would like to see a little more of the evidence. And I think there ought to be a very thorough investigation into this. And we should withhold our judgment for now, but clearly investigate it further.

LEHRER: All right. Let's talk about what the United States -- how the United States should play this now. Columnist William Safire and others have suggested that the United States has gone -- is essentially telling the Italians, "Cool it. Back off. We don't want an investigation. We've got to deal with these Russians. Leave them alone. Go away."

Is that the way we ought to play it?

CARTER: I hope Safire's wrong. I hope this Administration is encouraging the Italians to go forward as aggressively as possible. But I hope we're doing it in a quiet way. The Italians appear to be doing a fairly good investigative job, and I think it's better that they do it, because our motives are a little suspect in the area of Soviet relations. Our language in the last few years has been a little shrill. And also, when we get into this assassination area, our history isn't entirely clean.

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So I think it's better to let the Italians go forward. And any help that the CIA or the FBI or other agencies can give, we should give it quietly.

LEHRER: What do we -- what are the pros and cons -- I don't know how to put this. What does the United States potentially have to gain if in fact a good circumstantial case of Soviet involvement is in fact proved down the line?

CARTER: I think we might gain something from it; not as much as one might wish. But what the Soviets did was truly outrageous, if they did attempt to kill the Pope. And I think it's something that the rest of the world will draw lessons from.

What I think we ought to do is if a case is proven -- it'll never be entirely clear because, as just pointed out, there's no Freedom of Information Act that's going to say we've got a case. But to the extent a good case can be shown, I think the U.S. can use that as a tool or as a reminder to people, when we are talking about East-West relations, just the kind of people that we're dealing with and just what the new leadership might be like.

Andropov is not a closet liberal. Andropov was head of the KGB, who might well have been involved in this activity. And we ought to remember who we're dealing with.

LEHRER: But should we adjust our own dealings with the Soviet Union based on this?

CARTER: Well, I think right now -- we're taking a fairly strong anti-Soviet position as is, and in fact might have gone too far in recent months on occasion. But I think right now we're engaged in some sensitive negotiations with our European allies and with Japan over trade and economic relations with the Soviet bloc. And in those negotiations, about whether we should do high-technology trade with the Soviets, whether we should sell them oil and gas equipment, whether we should give them commercial credits, what should be our relations with the Soviets -- in those negotiations, I think the U.S. should be able to say to its allies, Japan, Western Europe, "My God, look at who we're dealing with. This is yet another reason for us to be fairly strong in terms of limiting the trade we do with the Soviets."

LEHRER: Finally, let me ask you this. There is another theory going around that Andropov's enemies in the Soviet Union have set this whole thing up to discredit him. I mean this is a disinformation thing at work, a domestic political problem in the Soviet Union. Do you buy that?

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CARTER: Well, it seems that they really planned well in advance, if there's this whole train of evidence that we've heard that ties the Soviets back. Someone had to expect Andropov was going to get into power. And then, the information isn't even leaking from the Soviet Union. It's coming from other places, including Italy, which I'm not sure that Andropov's enemies have a control over.

LEHRER: In other words, you don't buy that.

CARTER: Right.

LEHRER: Thank you.

MACNEIL: Mr. Hinsey, finding this plot story credible, as you do, how do you think Mr. Reagan and other Western leaders should behave towards the Kremlin, with this knowledge?

HINSEY: Well, they should certainly behave with a great deal of circumspection and care. I think, for the time being, the posture of being relatively quiet and letting the investigations proceed is the wisest posture. I don't think there's any need for Mr. Reagan to say anything at this point, because enough other people are saying things.

MACNEIL: Mr. Ledeen, you want to add to that?

LEDEEN: Well, I think the point is this, long-term: that if the evidence stands up and if the case is finally demonstrated, then isn't it time, finally, for us to get serious about anti-terrorism? And isn't it time, finally, to go back and take a look at all the stuff that's been going on for so many years where the Soviet connection has been so resolutely pooh-poohed in so many corners, and start asking what must we do to defend the West against this kind of systematic organization?

MACNEIL: Mr. Gelman, does this, in your view, taking the -- for the moment supposing that this case is believed, is this a case for a very serious reevaluation of Western attitudes towards the Soviet leadership?

GELMAN: Yes, I would think so. The essential problem, however, is what constitutes proving. The amount of proof that may be available is subject to different evaluations by different groups in the society. I think it's going to be rather difficult to get a consensus in firm agreement that the Soviets and Brezhnev and Andropov did it, even in the United States, let alone in the West.

I hope I'm mistaken. I hope there'll be sufficient evidence that will show the matter clearly one way or another

before we're finished. But at all costs, we've got to establish a consensus as to what it is, and build our policy on that. It should not be allowed to be another issue on which the West founders in great disarray.

I think there are a lot of people in the West who will be most reluctant to come to this conclusion, because the consequences are very, very grave indeed.

MACNEIL: Well, let's ask about them. Does anyone, Mr. Hinsey, Mr. Ledeen, Mr. Carter, think that it would be better policy for the West, since it has got to deal with Mr. Andropov and the others, simply to say this information isn't true and to disregard the case and pretend it hasn't happened?

Mr. Hinsey, what do you think?

HINSEY: I really don't see why we should conclude that we have to deal with Mr. Andropov. He's only been in office a very short period of time. He certainly is not a closet liberal. It's entirely possible that some of Mr. Andropov's colleagues might find that he is not the man to continue to represent their country.

After all, when Richard Nixon was found guilty of far less grave misdeeds, the processes of our society, the congressional investigation process, the free press, brought Mr. Nixon down, brought him to the point of resignation.

MACNEIL: Are you suggesting this could bring Mr. Andropov down or make him somehow ineligible?

HINSEY: I don't see why we should rule that out.

MACNEIL: Do you have a view on that, Mr. Ledeen?

LEDEEN: I don't. I'm not a Soviet expert.

But I want to make just one minor point, and that is that I don't think that documenting this case is an earth-shaking event in one's understanding of the Soviet system. Since if it's not this case, it's one of another case, one of a whole series of cases. The point is that Soviet society, and the KGB in particular, is a society and an organization that do this kind of thing. That is what it is there to do. They have four million people in a gulag, and Mr. Andropov ruled over that gulag.

So, I don't see the drama of this event in terms of reassessing the nature of the Soviet system. It's a tremendously important case...

MACNEIL: Well, it was the Pope, after all.

LEDEEN: Well, sure it was the Pope. The point that has to be made in terms of assessing the evidence, I think, is that Italy, which has been one of the most prudent and soft-spoken countries in the world on this subject, even though it's been run over by terrorists for years, is on this case, the only one on which it has the firsthand evidence, very outspoken. And I am very much persuaded by the outspokenness of these three independent Italian judges. And I would add this to Mr. Gelman's lists of things to evaluate. Remember, it's not an intelligence service that's investigating it for the Italians, it is a series of independent judges who have discovered an interlocking series of facts from three independent investigations. This is, I think, important to keep in mind.

MACNEIL: Well, thank you, Mr. Ledeen, Mr. Hinsey, Mr. Carter, and also Mr. Gelman in Los Angeles.